THE SHIP FROM YUCATAN

By Miss *CARRA CALSTOCK*

PART 2: AN UNSEASONAL STORM

28th May 1841.

I kept the medallion with me often. Despite its macabre appearance, I found a queer comfort in to its weight, an odd sense of companionship from seeing it atop the mahogany of the table at my preferred perch in the parlour.

The spring had been eerily still, the west coast usually being prone to the sort of storms which, on several occasions, have cut short a walk around the gardens by driving me into the shelf of the house. While I detest being caught in the rain so, not least because it exasperates by ague, there is something quite magical about being at the window overlooking the sea as nature throws herself against the windowpane. As such, I was quite put out by the lack of showers.

Our poor gardens missed the spring rains too, and though Harrison the groundskeeper struggled manfully with water from the well, the rose bushes were near as frail as I, and little had bloomed at all since the departure of the dew violets and daffodils. By the rise of summer, both I and the garden found ourselves storm starved and somewhat droopy.

It was this way that the summer found us; quite parched. Perhaps taking mercy upon us, clouds gathered and commenced a downpour so spectacular that the rain flowed in tiny rivers across the paving stones of the courtyard.

I watched, entranced somewhat by this sudden change in the weather, from the main door which had been left ajar. Mattley stepped smartly around my enraptured figure to close the entryway, and suggested to me that, if I wished to enjoy the storm, I should have a better view from one of the upstairs windows. Taking this advice on board, I returned to my customary place by the parlour window.

I set the medallion on the table, next to the book I was making my way through – a compendium of folk tales from the dark lands to the east of Hungary. I had no plans to read for the moment, engrossed as I was in the pattering rain and faraway rumble and crash of the elements at their most ferocious.

The rain tap-tapped against the glass. I kept the window opened a crack to better hear the storm's gentle tattoo.

At peace, I sank into the leather of the chair. I found myself slipping from excitement to reverie. Valdez's medallion in my palm, my own piece of the new world. Oh, comforting golden warmth. No recollection had I of lifting it from the tabletop.

My reverie gave way shortly to languor, a soft warm weight that spread perhaps from my chest, perhaps from my palm, I cannot say with certainty. I let the focus of my gaze drift where it would, at times watching the droplets chase one another down the windowpane, at times turned towards the weather-blurred horizon.

I sank back further, cradled at my back by the soft chair. Thus relaxed, I allowed my head to loll and fancied again the alien sensation of a gentle hand describe the curve of my cheek, towards my neck. Rested as I was against my chair, there was no sudden plunge to wake me. My gaze, now unfocused, bore towards the distance, where the sky blurred into rain. My eyelids grew heavy. The queer sensation of being touched so slipped lower, so this unseen hand pressed lightly onto my neck. My eyes closed.

Somewhere amid the sharp pungency of the rain-freshed garden outside and the familiar, slightly dusty, comfort of the parlour, there was a sudden sweet smell, such that brough to mind salts being passed under my nose. The foreign sensation at my throat pressed closer, near roughly, somewhere in the space between comfort and threat. I started awake.

At a loss, I glanced around bleary and confused. It was dark, and seemed as though the sun had dipped from sight and evening had fallen. Thinking I must have dozed off, a I felt a faint flicker of annoyance – I must have missed dinner! Why had Ms Ida not called me? Surely she'd know where I was. I stood, thinking to seek her out, that I might remonstrate with her on this topic.

However, I found myself heavy of limb and quite giddy. My breath caught and my vision began to swim. I stumbled, then sprawled headlong across the soft carpet.

I know not if I lay thus prone for mere seconds, or the full span of minutes, perhaps even longer. My heart fluttered hard, as a bird against the bars of a cage, and a smear of impossible colour swam before my eyes. The ague! It must be the ague, thought I. Feeling pitiful at the effort it took to raise myself on my elbows, weighed down further by the shame of it all. I simply couldn't call out for Ms Ida, my pride wouldn't bear it, and I instead resolved to remain prone in quiet until I had gathered such strength that I might at least regain my chair. It was thus, shaking and ashamed, that the most unusual sensation came over me. It was almost as if I heard a voice without language or words.

A yearning, wordless but no less enormous for its lack of diction, filled me, as if the words of another had bypassed mere hearing and spoke directly to my soul. An entreaty barely separate from my own thoughts asked me, why struggle? Distinct from Ms Ida's chides for my unseemly determination, these foreign thoughts asked of me, was the carpet not comfortable? It surely was. Was the effort of standing too much for my poor limbs to bear? Perhaps, though curse me for entertaining the notion at all!

It was in this state of drowse and disarray that Ms Ida found me. Naturally, she gasped in alarm and pitched herself to her knees at seeing me thus. To hear her fuss and worry, I must have borne passing resemblance to one unconscious.

She cried, 'Miss Briar!' and fussed with my hair and face until it became apparent that I was conscious. At which, she asked if I thought I had the strength within me to stand.

I gathered my knees beneath me, overcome by the shame of it all, I burst into a fit of weeping. Oh, how could I have entertained such thoughts? Had I not the strength to try, in the very least? God rain every blessing on Ms Ida for not voicing it, but how piteous and frail she must have thought me.

Through my tears, I began to relate to Ms Ida that I was looking for her, in fear I had not been roused for dinner.

Ms Ida's expression of concern gave way to confusion at my line of thinking, she held my hand and brushed my hair with her fingers to soothe my agitation.

'But Miss Briar,' she said, between shushing and cooing, 'it's barely past three.'

I stopped and blinked. A faint panic welled in my bosom. Ms Ida took me gently by the elbow and walked with me to the window, where I saw to my shock that it was still, though gloomy with weather, very much the mid-afternoon. Giddy as I already was, I felt myself sway and swoon at this fright. I fought like a fiend to regain my composure, but alas.

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My next certain recollection was awaking from the dreamless oblivion of the soul rendered unconscious by forces greater than fatigue. I found myself sunken in the familiar softnesses and scents of my bed.

Ms Ida's comforting presence filled my view. She mopped at my forehead with a warm towel.

'Miss Briar, I had such a fear!' She exclaimed. 'I had Mattley send for a physician, and had Cook prepare you something light. I fear this time you did sleep past dinner, and it's grown quite late.'

Not trusting my lungs to push sufficient air for speech, I simply nodded to acknowledge Ms Ida's words.

Ms Ida fed me with broth and soft bread, no doubt requested of Cook in case the physician advise against overindulgence. That notion drew concern from the maelstrom of my thoughts to the forefront of my mind. The ministrations of the Torstow physicians, while no doubt expertly devised to address my ague and remove

the sickness at the root, often served to leave my weak and the better for a good meal.

As I felt too fragile to offer protest and so instead offered a silent prayer that the doctor might give his treatment and prescription and begone before Cook's duties had ended for the night.

Ms Ida, constant and tender as she is, awaited the arrival of the physician with me. All was, however, not bleak and stormy. As memory of the strange hand and unbidden thought cleared from my mind, I was better able to raise myself to sitting, and at last to trust myself to speak without a quaver in my voice.

Ms Ida, after some light conversation, enquired if I felt well enough to receive news; with the promise that said news was good.

Upon hearing my assurance that I was indeed well enough to be imparted tidings, Ms Ida's face lit with an excited characteristic of her best humours – the recounting of a grant excitement, or the midst of a brilliant diversion - the delight that makes a mockery of time and belies the channels time etches upon us all.

'Miss Briar, word has come from your father. He is to be visiting within the fortnight!'

END OF PART TWO